

Oral Health and Pregnancy

“Recent studies point to associations between oral infections... and preterm, low-weight births.”¹



Oral Health in Massachusetts: A Fact Sheet

What is the public health issue?

Oral health is integral to general health.² There is now evidence suggesting that oral health, particularly gum disease, may have an impact on the occurrence of preterm births, resulting in low birth weight babies. Pregnant women with periodontal (gum) disease may be seven times more likely to have a baby that's born too early and too small.³ The exact connection between poor oral health and preterm birth is unknown. It is thought that periodontal disease may lead to premature birth by the bacteria in the mouth spreading to the placenta or amniotic fluid, and also that systemic inflammation caused by periodontitis may lead to preterm labor and membrane rupture.⁴ The likely problem is a chemical found in oral bacteria called prostaglandin, which can induce labor and which occurs in very high levels in severe cases of periodontal disease.³ Additionally, there are certain oral problems that affect pregnant women specifically. About half of women experience pregnancy gingivitis, beginning in the second or third month of pregnancy that increases in severity throughout the eighth month. This condition can be uncomfortable and cause swelling, bleeding, redness or tenderness in the gum tissue.⁵ In some cases, gums swollen by pregnancy gingivitis can react strongly to irritants and form large growths, called “pregnancy tumors”, which are not cancerous and are generally painless. If a tumor persists, it may require removal by a dentist.⁵ It is very important for pregnant women to maintain their oral health.

In the U.S.⁶:

- The rate of preterm births is 12.8%
- The low birthweight rate is 8.3%

In Massachusetts⁶:

- The preterm rate is 9%, which is 30% lower than the national rate
- The percentage of LBW infants is 7.9%, which is 5% lower than the national rate
- The percentage of VLBW infants is 1.3%

Babies born early are at an increased risk for health problems.

Improving Oral Health Before and During Pregnancy

- ✓ Drink fluoridated water
- ✓ Brush your teeth and gums twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and floss each day
- ✓ Make an appointment with a dental provider
- ✓ Make good nutritional choices; limit sweet drinks and avoid refined sugar
- ✓ Include Vitamin C and Calcium in your daily diet
- ✓ Quit smoking
- ✓ Get plenty of rest
- ✓ Learn how to take care of the baby's gums and teeth now

Infant/Toddler Oral Health Tips

- ❖ Consult a pediatrician, family physician or dentist on the most appropriate water to use with reconstituted infant formula.
- ❖ Start oral care early; begin wiping the baby's gums with a cloth or gauze each day and start brushing as soon as the first tooth appears.
- ❖ Supervise the child's brushing.
- ❖ Try to schedule the child's first dental visit around his or her first birthday.

What is the impact of premature birth in the U.S.?

Births are considered preterm when they occur before 37 weeks gestation.⁴ Preterm births can result in both low birth weight (LBW), less than 2,500 grams or 5.5 pounds, and very low birth weight (VLBW) babies, a weight of less than 1,500 grams or 3.3 pounds.⁶ Premature birth and low birthweight babies significantly contribute to the incidence of infant mortality, accounting for 70% of prenatal deaths in the U.S.⁴ Disorders related to short gestation and low birth weight were the second leading cause of infant death in 2004, affecting 4.6% of babies.⁷ Premature births have soared to become the number one obstetric problem in the United States³, and the percentage of LBW infants has increased by 36% since 1990 when it was 5.8%.⁶ Many premature babies come into the world with serious health problems, and those who survive may suffer life-long consequences.³ Moreover, LBW infants suffer from numerous health complications.

What is Massachusetts doing?

- Massachusetts participates in the *Women, Infant and Children Nutrition Program* (WIC). WIC is a program that provides nutrition and health education, healthy food and other services free of charge to Massachusetts families who qualify. WIC's goal is to help keep pregnant and breastfeeding women, new moms, and kids under age 5 healthy. **To apply for WIC, call 1-800-WIC-1007.**⁸
- The Department of Public Health Division of Primary Care and Health Access initiated the *Family Planning Program* which promotes and provides comprehensive family planning services, including clinic-based services and often community education and outreach. Family planning is an integral component of the efforts to reduce infant mortality and morbidity, and improve the health of women and men of all ages.⁹
- *Growing Up Healthy* is a website sponsored by the Division for Perinatal, Early Childhood, and Special Health Needs within the Department of Public Health. The website provides information in both English and Spanish about ways to raise a healthy child. This information can be accessed at www.mass.gov by clicking [For Consumers](#) > [Community Health and Safety](#) > [Family and Community Health](#) > [Pregnancy and Newborn](#) > [Growing Up Healthy](#).¹⁰

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